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Application Letters: A Neglected Area in the Job Search

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The application letter is often lost in the quest for the perfect resume. But a clear, detailed application letter can clear the road to interviews and job offers.

The current economic turndown in a number of business areas, the displacement of many middle managers by newly created office technology, and the continuing shift from a manufacturing to a service economy have caused many low- and mid-level managers to undergo one of life's most traumatic and frightening experiences—the job search. Such a search can be conducted in a number of ways, ranging from hiring a placement agency to contacting job associates, friends, and even relatives about possible job openings. But regardless of which avenue is selected, the job seeker will in all likelihood be required to submit a resume and an accompanying application letter.

Although updating a resume or creating a new one may seem a daunting task, job applicants have effective models to help guide them through the process. Bookstore shelves are filled with numerous how-to books that offer solid tips on constructing visually appealing, well-organized, readable resumes. Furthermore, since a resume is designed to give a snapshot of an applicant's qualifications and accomplishments, the applicant has to make only a limited number of format and stylistic decisions.

However, the amount and quality of advice given about application letters leaves much to be desired. Often this letter is dismissed as unimportant; it is seen as no more than a formality, a brief, polite note whose purpose is merely to transmit the resume to the appropriate reader. Popular books on employment searches indirectly reaffirm this notion by giving cursory treatment to application letters—usually a short chapter that follows extensive treatment of resumes and interviews. Similarly, business communication textbooks devote only a few pages to letters of application, and these focus almost exclusively on entry-level positions. Even first-rate graduate schools, such as Harvard's Graduate School of Business, undercut the importance of application letters by distributing brief model letters for job seekers to modify slightly to fit their situations.

Is the application letter merely a device used to convey a resume to a prospective employer? Job applicants, especially those with significant work experience, miss an excellent opportunity to convey important information about their qualifications, attitudes, and character if they view an application letter as merely a re-

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sume transmittal document. This article explains why a detailed, one-page application letter is preferable to a short, two-paragraph transmittal letter. Also, it discusses the pitfalls that job applicants writing detailed letters should avoid. Finally, the article offers a number of guidelines—or what we call *credos*—to give job seekers a competitive edge in landing company interviews.

WHY A DETAILED APPLICATION LETTER

Proponents of brief, two-paragraph application letters claim that employment decision makers do not have time to read detailed letters. Furthermore, they note that the resume conveys all the information the decision maker needs in deciding whom to interview. Unfortunately, this argument misses the fact that a strategically organized and well-written one-page letter is as easy to read as a quickly dashed-off short letter. Furthermore, the letter can reveal important information about the job candidate, especially one with detailed business experience requiring explanation that neither a brief letter nor even an effective resume can convey.

There are three solid reasons why a job applicant should take the trouble to write a detailed application letter. First, the detailed letter signals that the applicant is genuinely interested in working for the company. The

applicant's efforts at explaining how his or her qualifications meet the company's employment needs is a subtle, sincere form of flattery to the reader and to the organization; the company is not merely one of many organizations on the applicant's potential employment scorecard.

In contrast, a cover letter that merely transmits a resume to a prospective employer may leave a nasty taste in the reader's mouth. A perfunctory letter demonstrates little initial commitment to the job or the organization. Here is an example of one such letter:

Dear Sirs:

Please find enclosed a copy of my resume, which describes my qualifications in great detail. If you are interested in my qualifications, please write me at the address listed on the resume.

This cold, impersonal letter offers every impression that the reader is merely one of many to receive the attached resume.

A second advantage to a detailed application letter is that this approach enables the applicant to highlight or clarify key points on a resume and relate these points to the company's needs. This connection of the applicant's qualifications and achievements with company needs is virtually impossible to do in a resume because the limited format demands a mere outline of facts from the applicant's viewpoint. One applicant, for exam-

ple, used a cover letter to stress this important point:

You will notice on my resume that in addition to ten years of bank-related work experience and an educational background in finance, I have also been involved in a variety of community service organizations. My fund-raising work with the United Way, YMCA, Chamber of Commerce, and Kiwanis reflects my belief that bank officers need to be directly involved with and contribute their talents to the community. Furthermore, active involvement in the community provides added dividends in the form of community goodwill and positive exposure of a bank.

Finally, and most importantly, application letters enable prospective employers to begin judging how well the writer will mesh with the company's work force. Unlike a resume, where style is limited to verb and noun phrases, objective language, and the third-person point of view, the application letter gives stylistic latitude, providing an opportunity for the writer to convey key personality traits that match those cultivated by the organization. For example, a young, aggressive salesperson wanted to work for a new, entrepreneur-oriented computer company. In addition to providing a well-crafted, visually appealing resume, she included an application letter that began like this:

Dear Mr. Ackermann:

I want to sell for ABC. And I'm certain I'd be good at it. I'd like to schedule an interview with you so I can explain why my computer knowledge, previous sales experience, and educational background make me well qualified for a marketing rep position with ABC. To whet your appetite, I've provided you with some important details about my qualifications and accomplishments.

The two staccato sentences at the beginning of the opening paragraph, the numerous first person pronouns, the contractions, and the graphic, action-oriented language work together to create a confident, brash, aggressive image of the job applicant. The rest of the letter—in a somewhat tempered manner—reinforces this image.

Although many readers may feel this applicant sounds arrogant and overbearing, the company's marketing director was looking for reps who had the energy and confidence to battle the firmly entrenched competition. And the job applicant, *who had done her homework and knew the type of people the marketing department was hiring*, realized the best way to convey this image was in a tailored letter of application.

Obviously, different images are appropriate for different jobs and different companies. The opening paragraph of the following letter was written by an auditor working for a medium-sized company in the South. For a variety of reasons he wanted to relocate in a large urban area in the Midwest. The letter is deliberately low-keyed yet forceful.

Dear Mr. Grabowski:

I am interested in working as an auditor for ABC Company. Consequently, I would like to interview with you so I can describe how my three years of auditing experience and my solid educational background in accounting would enable me to contribute immediately to the audit team for ABC.

The medium-length sentences and measured language create an image of control and discipline. On the other hand, the first person pronouns and the interview request in the first paragraph convey a degree of strength and confidence. The rest of this letter, which describes in a deliberate but forceful manner the applicant's work experience and educational background, adds to the professional image created in the first paragraph.

It is, of course, essential to add that an applicant must be sure to convey a personality that is consistent with his or her own, not one that is merely a fabrication designed to impress a reader. If the applicant is interviewed and conveys a personality far different from the one projected in the application letter, the interviewer may feel duped and question the integrity of the applicant.

FOUR PITFALLS TO AVOID IN A COVER LETTER

A well thought-out, carefully composed application letter can give job seekers an added advantage over their competitors. However, when composing such a letter, job seekers must also be aware of possible pitfalls resulting from outdated, 1950s' ideas as to how application letters should be structured and how employers read such letters.

Pitfall 1: The "Have I Got a Deal for You" Sales Approach

Writers of detailed application letters often incorrectly assume that this type of letter is a spin-off of a sales letter. By definition, sales letters involve persuasive situations in which writers expect opposition from their readers. As a result, sales letters traditionally have the following four-part structure:

1. Attention
2. Interest
3. Conviction
4. Action

This inductive pattern of organization delays the real purpose of the communication, the request for an interview, until the action section at the end of the letter.

Although this organizational pattern may be correct for sales letters, it is inappropriate for application letters for several reasons. First, it wastes both the reader's and the writer's time. The writer wastes time trying to write a cagey, manipulative letter that sounds interesting and nonmanipulative. The reader, who usually has a large number of other pressing tasks that demand attention, wastes time wading through catchy metaphors and seemingly nondirected paragraphs to determine what the writer wants.

The second problem with the indirect sales approach is that it usually does cause readers to feel manipulated, thus making them suspicious of the application. Such feelings of suspicion result largely from the inherent difficulty in writing a natural-sounding "advertisement for myself" type of letter. Most writers lack the sophisticated verbal and organizational skills necessary to make sales-application letters sound sincere; consequently, their attempts to generate interest seem fabricated and transparent. As a result, they appear to be trying to dupe the reader and inadvertently wind up sounding foolish, even inane. The following excerpt from a letter exemplifies this point:

Gentlemen:

Your ad for "innovative systems analysts" in your new Synthetic Crude and Mineral Division is the most exciting career opportunity ad I have read! Let me explain why:

First, I like your company. I have worked for you before (from January 1981 to August 1981), and feel an affinity for the company and its goals.

The remaining three paragraphs of the letter continue in this "gee whiz" kind of tone before the job applicant suddenly shifts gears in the last paragraph and states, "I look forward to an interview at your earliest convenience to discuss prospective employment with you." The early paragraphs seem like an obvious attempt to soften the reader so the writer can apply the

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clinch—when the reader’s resistance is down.

The third problem with the sales-application letter approach is that many business people are almost automatically suspicious of any message that tries to grab attention but delays its purpose. In the last 25 years, people in general, and business people in particular, have become extremely self-conscious about the persuasive tactics marketing and advertising professionals have developed. Conditioned by years of mass mailings, thousands of magazine ads, and hundreds of hours of television commercials, business people have the indirect pattern of organization imprinted in their wary psyches. Consequently, when a job applicant uses this approach to pitch his or her qualifications, the reader may unconsciously associate the job candidate with a life insurance, car, or home products salesperson. In short, the very use of the indirect pattern of organization may evoke a less than favorable image of the candidate and his or her qualifications.

Applicants can overcome the tendency toward a sales-application approach by remembering that employers do not have a built-in resistance to interviewing candidates; they need skilled employees as much as job applicants need careers. A prospecting application letter is thus not only an “advertisement for myself” but also an orderly presentation of information to give a specialized reader—whoever is involved in the candidate selection process—a chance

to decide logically whether the candidate is worth interviewing. The job candidate’s task is to demonstrate that he or she ought to be interviewed for the position. The applicant provides such support by *informing* the reader of his or her requisite education, work experience, and personality for the job.

Furthermore, when applicants abandon the cat-and-mouse approach of the sales letter, they get to the point and reveal the purpose of their communication in the first paragraph. By requesting an interview at the beginning and then stating their qualifications in detail, writers quickly and thoroughly indicate what they want from the reader and what they can provide the organization. Moreover, employers generally appreciate this strategy because it enables them to determine rapidly whether the writer’s qualifications fit their needs for a particular position.

Pitfall 2: The “Flattery Will Get Me Somewhere” Approach

A Chinese proverb says this about flattery:

He who praises me on all occasions is a fool who despises me, or a knave who wishes to cheat me.

Expert flatterers, of course, are never found out. Unfortunately—or fortunately, as the case may be—very few people have the aplomb and verbal skill to beguile most readers. Those

who try and fail are usually labeled insincere, deceptive, untrustworthy, or obsequious.

Such labels are devastating to prospective job applicants. Yet a number of applicants continue to try their hand at flattering employers despite the obvious risks. Think, for example, how often the following lines or similar versions of them appear in job application letters:

Yours is a growing, progressive firm.

You are the leader in the computer industry.

I know that your firm hires only the best applicants.

I have read about your training program and find it to be the most perfectly planned and ambitious program that I have ever seen.

At best, employers view these phrases as courteous attempts at praise. At worst—and perhaps more frequently—they see them as feeble attempts at manipulation or as insults to their intelligence because the job applicant implies they are unsuspecting or unwise. Furthermore, an application letter littered with such ingratiating comments suggests a vacuousness in the job applicant; the applicant cannot develop anything other than trite phrases to describe his or her qualifications.

There is, of course, a flip side to the

flattery coin—praise for the writer. Any experienced application-letter reader can recite verbatim a baker's dozen of stock phrases that job applicants commonly use to praise their own skills. Here are a few such examples:

My energy, common sense, and excellent training should serve your company well.

I am a hard worker who devotes all of my energy to every job, project, or assignment I receive.

My superb training will enable me to make meaningful contributions to your well-regarded organization.

All of my contemporaries find me likeable, pleasant, and intelligent.

Obviously, job applicants have to describe their qualifications and accomplishments, but resorting to hyperbole—descriptive adjectives such as *excellent*, *superb*, *all*, and so on—only weakens their case. Rather than relying on bland generalizations and stock phrases threadbare from constant use, applicants should describe several of their main accomplishments and clearly relate them to the skills required by the job.

Pitfall 3: The "You Have to Answer My Question" Trap

This pitfall is first cousin to the "Have I Got a Deal for You" approach; both are transparently manipulative, attention-getting strategies. However, they are different in that Pitfall 3 is based not only on the indirect organizational pattern but on the inclusion of both rhetorical and real questions. The writer using this strategy assumes questions will draw the reader into the letter and compel him or her to respond.

Often, rhetorical questions appear at the beginning of letters. In such cases they take the following format:

When was the last time you interviewed an experienced manager who wanted to direct others

and had a successful track record doing so?

When you make the change to electronic data processing, about which you wrote in *Fortune* this week, are you going to need to employ an experienced programmer?

Since tax time will soon be upon us, could you use another accountant who has experience filling personal and small business tax forms?

In other cases, the questions are interspersed throughout the letter. Here is a disguised, though real, letter submitted for a college teaching position. Notice how it asks specific questions that force the reader to respond and how it implicitly assumes that the applicant should be considered as a finalist for the job.

Dear Mr. Smith:

I wish to inquire in confidence about the position in finance advertised in the October *Finance Journal*.

Specifically, how many courses would constitute a full teaching load in your department? Which courses would the new faculty member teach? What are their maximum enrollments? Would you consider hiring at the Associate Professor level? What salary ranges do you offer at the Assistant and Associate Professor levels?

I have considerable experience in finance and in teaching, as outlined on the enclosed resume. Also, I have experience in consulting and in external training. Would you be interested in someone with my credentials?

Thank you for your attention to my inquiry.

Several problems can occur when applicants use questions in application letters. First, the applicant may not get the response he or she ex-

pects. For example, a recruiter may feel compelled to respond to a "do you need" type of opening with a blunt "No." Obviously that kind of response would ruin the impact of the opening. Second, the very structure of interrogative sentences is risky. Some of these sentences convey an unconfident, passive image of the applicant. For example, the applicant who asks about the need for an experienced programmer sounds unsure whether the company needs such a person. Third, questions may make employers feel trapped into making personal responses to candidates when they may have neither the time nor the inclination to do so. As a result, the question approach may seem no more than a rhetorical ploy.

Pitfall 4: The "Let Me Impress You with My Vocabulary and Style" Approach

A final pitfall that can trip up application-letter writers is the attempt to dazzle readers with ornate language and complex style. Naturally, job applicants want to impress readers. But many applicants mistakenly believe that uncommon words and long, complex sentences reflect superior intelligence and good breeding. Listed below are several sentences taken from application letters that try to impress rather than express ideas:

I am initializing a job search which will, hopefully, result in my gaining a position in a dynamic organization where I can synergistically enjoy rewards commensurate with my efforts.

In this letter I hope to begin a dialogue with you which might bring about a successful interface of my generalist background with the needs of your discretionary program.

Your organization, I am certain, can give me the opportunity toward self-actualization that can translate into a unified scheme of employee motivation and company productivity.

These gummed-up sentences are

devoid of meaning. Furthermore, they signal to the reader that the applicant may be incapable of writing or speaking in a clear, forceful manner. Even more damaging, these sentences suggest the applicant is swayed by ready-made phrases and fashionable jargon and thus shirks the important responsibility of thinking carefully about what he or she wants to say.

FOUR CREDOS FOR APPLICATION LETTERS

At first glance, the application-letter writer is faced with a dilemma. A relatively short, transmittal-type letter runs the risk of inadequately conveying the applicant's qualifications, accomplishments, and character; on the other hand, a detailed letter may be snared by one or more pitfalls.

Job applicants can easily resolve this dilemma by not only taking the advice we have offered about avoiding these pitfalls, but also by keeping in mind several credos that ensure that letters of application completely convey information and at the same time speak well of the applicant.

Credo 1: I will always keep in mind that employers want to examine my credentials and get a sense of the kind of business person I am. I will therefore avoid manipulative organizational strategies such as gimmicky opening paragraphs and the transparent hype that characterizes many application letters. Instead, I will stick to clearly and precisely presenting my qualifications.

Credo 2: I will remember that employers are busy readers who don't have the time to leisurely peruse my letter. I will therefore state in the first paragraph why I am writing and what my major qualifications are. Also, I will do everything I can to make the letter as easy to read as possible.

Credo 3: I will remember that employers are intelligent, shrewd readers of application letters and not easily susceptible to insincere flattery. I will therefore not patronize them or massage their egos.

Credo 4: I will have confidence in my own qualifications; consequently, I will not feel compelled to rely on exaggerated language and complex sentences to showcase my talents.

These four credos provide the groundwork for application letters that will help land interviews. Of course, a job applicant is no better than his or her qualifications, and a well-composed application letter cannot make up for poor performance or inexperience. But if

job applicants avoid the pitfalls we discussed and take to heart the credos mentioned, they should be able to produce letters that resemble the efficient, clear application letter shown (see the box) and get the interviews where others may not. □

Sample Application Letter

Dear Mr. Steele:

I would like to interview for the position of Loan Department Head that you advertised in *The Wall Street Journal*. Let me detail my qualifications for the job by:

1. Highlighting some of my relevant work experience, and
2. Explaining my educational background.

Work Experience

For the last three years I have been Head of the Credit Department at L & L Savings and Loan. During this period, the department's loan rate has increased from 110 to 125 loans per month. In the same time period, the department's loan default rate has dropped from 18 to 8 per month. Much of the credit for these improvements goes to the loan officer training program I instituted two years ago.

During my three years at L & L, I spearheaded a drive to fully automate our office. All office personnel now have PCs that are networked with each other and tied in with L & L's central data base. Furthermore, personnel have the appropriate software to perform their tasks quickly and efficiently. This move to automation has reduced our work force from 50 to 42 employees; more importantly, throughout this change to automation employee morale remains high and office productivity has increased.

Education

My MBA with a concentration in banking from The University of Oregon has provided me with a solid theoretical background in banking and good problem solving and strategic management skills. Furthermore, my 3.8/4.0 grade point average indicates that I can quickly absorb new information and communicate complex ideas well in writing and in oral presentations.

My undergraduate degree is in business administration, with a major in accounting. I maintained a 3.5 grade point average out of a possible 4.0 as an undergraduate, and received an appointment to Tau Kappa Theta, the honorary accounting fraternity. The combination of my MBA and BS gives me a broadbased understanding of all the business functions.

Mr. Steeple, I believe that my work experience, management skills, and educational background qualify me for the position of Head of XYZ's Loan Department. The enclosed resume gives more details about my qualifications. I would like to personally meet with you to discuss thoroughly my qualifications for this position. You can reach me at (telephone #).